Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DECISION NOTICE AND FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Construction of a Fish Barrier on Cottonwood Creek,
Beartooth Wildlife Management Area

May 18, 2010

Project Proposal:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) propose replacement of an existing fish barrier on Cottonwood Creek located on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area. In 2000, a concrete fish barrier was constructed (EA, FWP, 2000) on Cottonwood Creek in an effort to restore westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) to approximately 8 miles of stream. Multiple piscicide treatments (EA, July 23, 2002 and August 15, 2007, FWP) and electrofishing efforts were necessary to completely remove non-native brook trout upstream of the constructed fish barrier. Native WCT from two populations in the Missouri River Drainage were transferred to Cottonwood Creek upstream of the fish barrier in 2009.

The original barrier is functioning but at risk of passing brook and rainbow trout around its sides during high spring run-off events. This project, if implemented, would involve replacement of the original structure with a larger barrier effective at high flows and removal of the old barrier. The transfer of WCT was initiated prior to barrier replacement because of concerns related to the immediate security of one of the donor populations.

Justification:

This WCT transfer expanded the total length of stream holding WCT in the Upper Missouri drainage from less than 44 miles to a total of 52 miles of stream (an increase of approximately 20 percent). During spring run-off in some years, the current barrier passes water around its sides. If brook or rainbow trout pass the current barrier, the transferred population of native WCT would be put at risk of displacement by brook trout and/or hybridization with rainbow trout. Prior piscicide treatments (4 total) would have been for naught and overall security of WCT in the Upper Missouri basin would be decreased, particularly the genetic component from the donor populations. The replication of pure WCT from donor streams helps in preserving their genetic legacy. In the event donor fish stocks are lost due to fire or drought, they can then be re-founded from fish obtained from the newly restored Cottonwood Creek population. Replication, protection, and expansion of native WCT will prevent the possible future listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act.

Environmental and Social Impacts of Project:

Funding for construction of the fish barrier on Cottonwood Creek was obtained through competitive grants from Future Fisheries Program of Montana FWP and PPL Montana. Construction activities are predicted to occur over a two to three week period. Every possible effort will be made to complete the barrier project prior to the initiation of big game hunting seasons on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area. Construction activities will follow best management practices and every effort will be made to minimize input of sediment into Cottonwood Creek. Prior to barrier construction, the following permits will be obtained: SPA 124 Permit (Montana Stream Protection Act), 318 Authorization (DEQ Short-Term Water Quality Standard for Turbidity), and a 404 Permit (Federal Clean Water Act).

Cumulative Effects:

Impacts from construction of a fish barrier would be limited to the construction period and a short recovery period afterward. We do not expect the barrier structure to require maintenance or for the barrier to create other/future unforeseen impacts to land resources. We do not foresee any other activities in the basin that would add to impacts of the proposed action. A separate barrier and rotenone treatment project is planned for Elkhorn Creek (separate tributary to Holter Reservoir) approximately 4 miles direct distance from the proposed project (separate EA). Because of the distance between these projects and the fact that these tributaries are not connected and enter Holter reservoir at different points we do not expects impacts to be cumulative. In addition, these projects will not be constructed during the same time period.

Public Involvement:

In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, an Environmental Assessment was prepared and circulated for public comment on March 4, 2010. Copies of the EA were made available at the State Library in Helena, the FWP Region 4 Headquarters in Great Falls, and the FWP internet web site. No Comments were received on the proposed project

Decision:

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the current high risk of extinction of genetically pure WCT in the Missouri River Drainage, it is my decision to proceed with Alternative 2, the proposed action. Alternative 2 involves construction of a fish barrier and removal of an old, less efficacious barrier on Cottonwood Creek on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this decision notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal. This alternative provides the best opportunity to benefit the conservation and restoration of WCT, helps relieve ESA listing pressure and also serves to illustrate the State's commitment to perpetuating native fish species. This project will help preserve WCT in Missouri Drainage by replicating two at risk populations of WCT and protecting the 8

miles of newly expanded range of WCT. I find there to be no significant impact on the human or physical environment associated with this project, except to help ensure the long-term persistence of pure, locally adapted WCT in the Missouri River Drainage. Therefore, I conclude the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Date: 5-18-2010

Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Supervisor
Great Falls, Montana

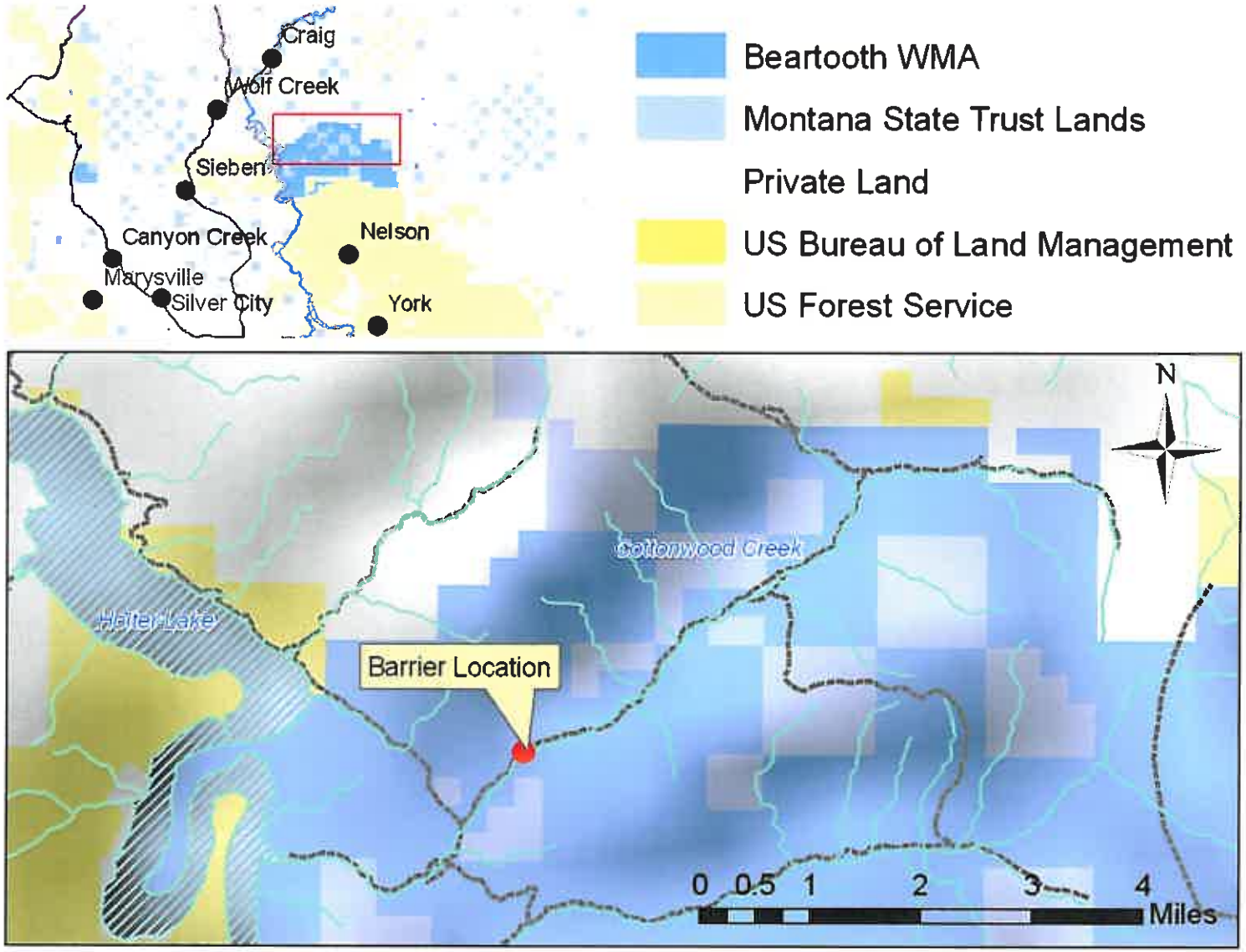

Figure 1. Map of the project area